

Making Teamwork Work: The Importance Of Performance Diversity In A Team



It is usual to talk about a “High Performance Team”, and indeed, every organisation would like all its teams to be maximising their performance. Getting optimum team performance is however, not simply a question of getting a group of high performing people together (if they meet the other criteria for team selection) and expecting them to deliver. High team performance may often be achieved by having a mix of members with varied performance levels rather than a team with uniform (even if all are high) performers.

This article is based on my personal experiences in the corporate sector and the learnings gained over several years of being a part of both the ends of a spectrum--executing within the team as well as nurturing and developing teams.

It considers the advantages of a team with diverse performers as opposed to a team with only high performers and makes a case for proactively choosing a mix of performers while creating a team. It also looks at the challenges of such a team as well as the leadership required to manage such teams.



As the objective of forming a team is achievement of the team's goals, performance record of potential team members often becomes an important criterion in team selection. The operating assumption is that a team composed of high-performers will naturally be a high-performing team.



This assumption, however, is belied by reality. There are disadvantages to having teams comprised solely of any one type of performer, and definite advantages to having a team with diverse performance levels¹ among the team members².

The Advantages of Diverse Performance Levels in a Team

1. The Cost Advantage

In today's scenario with organisations competing on slender margins and slim cost competitiveness, selecting some high and some average performers can work as a strategy to

keep costs within manageable budgets.

2. Smoother Intra-team Functioning

A greater proportion of high performers (or all high performers) in a team may lead to greater interpersonal disharmony as team members try to outshine each other. The perceived threat of colleagues who are presumably equally competent may lead to alterations in individuals' behaviour - they could become secretive, less willing to share learning and inclined to downplay others' achievement in relation to their own. High performers may also pose challenges to team leadership by questioning team manager's decisions and (covertly or overtly) aspiring for the leadership position. This may cause instability and insecurity in the team.

In a team with diverse performance levels, the number and intensity of interpersonal clashes may be less.

3. Faster Decision Making

Should the decision making process in a team require collaboration/consensus or the manager's style permit it, the presence of a large number of high performers, who are attached to their 'expert' opinions, may delay the decision making process. However, the presence of high performers contributes to the quality of decision making and improves it, and therefore it is imperative to involve them in the decision making process.

4. Allocation Of Tasks

A mixed performer team makes it easier to allocate jobs requiring a mix of creative, challenging tasks and repetitive, less creative tasks. Team leaders may prefer to delegate more repetitive, mundane or administrative tasks to average performers, and more challenging tasks to high performers, thus utilising the latter's



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¹ Performance is relative and high and average performers are defined comparatively.

² The ideas presented in this article apply to a stable team which has reached the 'Performing' stage in the Team Development Life Cycle (Tuckman, Bruce (1965). "Developmental sequence in small groups". Psychological Bulletin 63 (6): 384-99) , with no new entrants or exits in the consideration period.



time and skills optimally and reducing chances of frustration in high performers.

5. Distribution Of Limited Resources

Every team has inherent internal competition for rewards. In a team with diverse performance levels, reward allocation can be balanced out to give higher relative rewards for high and lower relative rewards for average performance. Career growth aspirations can also be managed better in a diverse performer team by reducing the proportion of people competing for limited growth options.

6. Greater Stability In The Team

A mix of star and average performers brings stability to a team. High performers have greater visibility, may have more aspirations, and have better credibility all of which contribute to greater career mobility. Average performers have lesser relative mobility and provide a team with continuity.

7. Manager's Time Spent In Managing

In a Mixed-Performer team, the team manager is able to balance his time required for people management. High-performers may typically not need too many task related inputs (though some may need handholding in interpersonal areas) and they could coach others on task areas, thus freeing up the manager's time.

8. Performance Synergy Leading To Organisation Growth

Mixing up high and average performers could help improve the performance levels of the average performers and of the

whole team over time through a process of continuous learning as well as motivation (by seeing the rewards for better performance). This is a key contributor to up-skilling in the organisation, and therefore, forming diverse performer teams can be a proactive strategy for organisation growth.

Challenges Of Dealing With A Team Of Diverse Performances

While a team with diverse levels of performers has many advantages, there are also challenges which could be faced by the team manager while handling the team. While these challenges do not take away from the advantages, it is important to be aware of them so that they can be managed proactively.

Motivating Average Performers: Knowledge of perceptions of performance disparities can demotivate average performers. On the other hand, if average performers are not made aware of their relatively lower performance, they may harbour expectations consistent with being high performers. Judicious feedback about their performance, along with explaining their importance and contribution to the team as well as drawing up a roadmap for performance enhancement will help keep average performers motivated. In a team with diverse performers, there is also a danger that cliques may form based on relative performance levels, as high performers stick together and the 'others' fraternize among themselves.

Motivating High Performers:

High performers in the team may also feel frustrated about the lower performance or slower pace of the average members of the team, and question the need to retain such team members, with consequent slower pace of delivery, decision making, knowledge dissemination and training. High performers may even feel that they are doing a larger share of work compared to their low performer counterparts.

In a start-up IT company in Bangalore, as customer orders started trickling in, project teams were aligned to individual clients. However, after a few months, significant attrition was noticed in the senior members of the teams. On delving into this, it was found that the higher performers in the team were frustrated at the learning curve requirement of the slower members, and at the proportion of their time required for on-the-job training and mistake correction of others, rather than 'being able to get on with the job at hand'. They also felt that their 'technical' experience was getting compromised due to the time spent on coaching and training of less experienced members. By not proactively managing training requirements and retaining challenging targets, management contributed to High Performers becoming disenchanted.

Perceptual Biases: Relying too much on past performance may negatively impact a diverse performer team. Past performance may not be an absolutely accurate indicator of future performance.



Team managers should evaluate current performance irrespective of past performance.

Meeting Deliverables: Another challenge will be to meet team deliverables and SLAs regardless of team composition with respect to performance levels of individual members. Internal and external customers expect a certain level of service or output from all members of the team and a team's reputation can be compromised if that does not happen. There have been cases where client organisations of consulting firms have pulled out of projects because they were not comfortable with the diverse levels of performers in the team and wanted only specific consultants to provide the service.

Role Of The Team Manager In A Team With Diverse Performances

Team managers contribute a great deal to a team's performance and its success or failure in achieving its objectives. Even a team composed solely of high performers may not be successful without effective leadership. In the case of an Indian IT major in Mumbai, a cross functional team of internal experts was formed within the HR and OD function. The HR head communicated that he had high expectations from the team, and initially there was high enthusiasm to complete the tasks. However, the assigned team leader was hardly visible during the project, and the team never quite got to working as a unit, resulting in a negative impact on the final output.

In a team with diverse performers, the team leader must keep in mind the following:

Proactively choose a mix of high and average performers while forming the team: The proportion of high and average performers in the team could be determined by budget, but a better determinant would be the work and objectives of the team. If the team is engaged in work that requires a high degree of independent thinking and working (e.g. the 'development' phase of software projects), a higher degree of high performers is needed as presumably, they will not need much guidance. On the other hand, for a team whose work is stable and even repetitive (e.g. the 'maintenance' phase of a software project), a lower proportion of high performers will suffice.

Reconstitute team as required: As a team with diverse performers progresses over time, the performance levels of individuals may improve due to collective learning. Erstwhile average performers may deserve better rewards and career development opportunities while high performers may look for newer areas to use their expertise. The team leader needs to keep track of these changes which will happen dynamically in a team and reconstitute the team as required, encouraging high performers to move out, giving more responsibilities to erstwhile average performers and

inducting other average performers in the team.

Adopt different Leadership styles: The presence of diverse performers will require the team leader to adopt different leadership styles while dealing with different people. The 'Situational Leadership Model'³ can be usefully applied to determine the different levels of task and relationship behavior inputs required by team members. Managers may also need different kinds of monitoring - average performers will require close task supervision, while it may be necessary to check up on the quality of decision making of high performers.

Summary

While mixed performer teams are often seen in organisations, they may not be formed proactively; rather their composition may be dictated by availability of different performers and budget constraints. However, there are distinct advantages to strategically forming a team of diverse performers. Organisations must include 'performance diversity' as a criterion for team formation and ensure that there is a correct proportion of high and average performers in a team. Mixing up different levels of performers in a team contributes to team success and can be a strategy for individual, team and organisational growth.

³Hersey, P. and Blanchard, K. H. (1969). Life cycle theory of leadership. *Training and Development Journal*, 23 (5), 26-34

